

**DSQ: Disability Studies Queered**

Shelley Tremain  
The Roeher Institute  
North York, Ontario  
Canada

Entitled "Disability Studies Queered," this issue of DSQ includes papers and reviews which focus on disabled queers (disabled lesbians, gay men, bisexual people and transgendered people). Each of the contributors to Disability Studies Queered uses the categories of sexual orientation and sexual identity as categories of analysis; furthermore, each of them assumes that these stigmatized sexualities and sexual identities influence and compound the experiences of disability that disabled queers confront. I have collated their writing in one issue in order to indicate areas of disability studies that are neglected when sexual variation is not taken into account.

With few exceptions, analyses in disability studies have not considered the differences that sexual variation make. Now, one might attribute this lacuna to the fact that there is, in general, a dearth of work on disabled people and sexuality that assumes a political conception of disability. Indeed, as Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells, and Davies point out, their recent publication, *The Sexual Politics of Disability*, is the first book-length study to consider disability and sexuality from a disability rights perspective (Shakespeare et al., 1996). Heretofore work on sexuality and disability, they argue, has been a product of medical and other authoritative discourses in whose terms disabled people are presumed to be asexual (i.e., are desexualized), or sexual in ways that are inherently pathological. As they explain it, furthermore, these professional discourses have usually taken the form of sexological and other disciplinary therapies, which survey the sexual practices of disabled people in order to render them objects of power/knowledge.

Because *The Sexual Politics of Disability* considers a variety of sexual orientations, preferences, and practices, it departs from most previous work on disability and sexuality done in disability studies where inquiry into queer sexualities and identities has been marginalised (see Hearn, 1988, 1991; Appleby, 1994; Shakespeare, 1996; Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells, and Davies, 1996; Tremain, 1996). Despite considerable efforts by disabled feminists and other disability theorists, many of those who work in disability studies continue to assume that disability can be examined in isolation from other categories (including, sexuality, gender, and race). As a number of disabled feminists and disabled people of colour have argued, universalizing theoretical gestures are conceptually, and politically misguided (see Fine and Asch, 1988; Morris, 1989; Begum, 1992; Stuart, 1992; Tremain, 1996). The social construction of (for instance) disablement, race, and normative (hetero)sexuality are mutually constitutive and mutually reinforcing. Analyses of disability

that are purported to be neutral with respect to sexuality, race, and gender actually universalize the experiences of quite specific groups of disabled people and erase relations of power between groups of disabled people. Thus, when disability theorists obscure other axes of power in order to privilege disability, they consolidate and reinstate the cultural narratives of dominant groups of disabled people. More specifically, when disability theorists universalize experiences of disability, they implicitly contribute to, and participate in the heterosexual practices which pervade mainstream culture. Since queer identities are sexual identities, when disability theorists deny the specificity of the sexual practices and identities of disabled queers, they inadvertently also prop up the notion that disabled people are asexual (Tremain, 1996).

Disability theorists ought to consider, therefore, how heterosexism and homophobia skew the design of research projects in disability studies. How do heterosexism and homophobia condition the ways in which research in the field is conducted, including which issues are deemed worthy of investigation, which questions are asked, and why, and which ones are precluded from the outset? For example: Does the design of a research proposal presume that families are comprised of two adults involved in a heterosexual relationship? What forms of institutionalized discrimination against some disabled people are sustained when 'sexual partner' is defined in ways that exclude same-sex relationships? Do analyses of particular pieces of policy or law even broach the ways in which they differently impact upon disabled queers and disabled straight people? How do current studies of abuse inflicted upon disabled people ignore acts of homophobia and disablism perpetrated against disabled lesbians, gay men, transgendered people and bisexual people? What important differences in perspectives, practices, and alliances are there between straight disabled women and queer disabled women? And how do analyses of the ostensibly generic category of "disabled women" paper over these differences? Why, moreover, is not opposition to the search for a "gay gene" (where "gayness" is pathologized) integral to disability rights challenges against eugenics?

My hope is that this issue of DSQ will suggest some of the ways that disability studies would be improved if disability theorists were to account for sexual orientation and sexual identity in their analyses. Employing sexual orientation and sexual identity as analytical categories would expand the interdisciplinarity of disability studies; would demonstrate additional ways in which the curricula elsewhere in the academy needs to be revised in order to promote social justice for disabled people (see Linton, 1998); and would increase the number of constituencies of disabled people whose experiences of disability are recognized and addressed within disability studies.

In the opening essay of *Disability Studies Queered*, Tom Shakespeare focuses upon the forms of discrimination which disabled queers experience from within lesbian and gay communities which are allegedly safe and welcoming havens for all queer people. Next, Alexa Schriempf considers ways in which Deafness, gender, and sexuality complicate accounts of identity. Then, Beth Ferri reports on research into the ways that learning disabled lesbians negotiate identity. Finally, drawing upon personal discussions with a lesbian who has experienced brain injury, Bonnie Shoultz discusses impediments to, and strategies for, building political solidarity between disabled and non-disabled lesbians.

## References

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